

Folk legends as Mirrors of Peoples' Experiences: The Virgathas of Kumaon and Garhwal

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Abstract: The Central Himalayan region popularly known as Uttarakhand, comprising of Kumaon and Garhwal, has a rich tradition of people's history and culture but has not been given adequate attention by historians and scholars. No doubt one is struck by the traits which bear similarity to those found in the plains and other areas, or those that have been borrowed from them or derived from a common origin. A closer look into the history and culture only reveals the distinctiveness of what can be termed as the *pahari* culture vis-à-vis its caste structure, ecological conditions, religious beliefs and practices, festivals, folk songs and legends. An interesting genre of folk legends of Kumaon and Garhwal is what is popularly known as *virgathas*, also called *pavadas*. They are the tales of kings and chieftains who once ruled the hills and valleys of Kumaon and Garhwal, and relate mostly to the period when this region was subject to internal feud and strife between petty chieftains. A study of these *gathas* reveals the perceptions and beliefs of the *pahari* people at a time when they were subject to political instability. *Virgathas* therefore constitute an important source of understanding better, the experiences of the people of this region, an exercise that has been largely neglected by academics and scholars.

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A recent trend in historical research registers a marked increase in micro-level regional studies. The Central Himalayan region popularly known as Uttarakhand and comprising Kumaon and Garhwal has a rich tradition of people's history and culture but this region has not been given adequate attention by historians and scholars. No doubt it has attracted the attention of some sociologists, geographers, anthropologists and adventurers who have done a good deal of field work and have produced interesting narratives on the basis of their personal observations. But one cannot entirely rely on their field work for a reconstruction of peoples experiences; it needs to be read in tandem with historical evidence and oral traditions. A closer look into the history and culture only reveals the distinctiveness of what can be termed as the *pahari* (Berreman 1997 :14) culture vis-à-vis its caste structure, ecological conditions, religious beliefs and practices, festivals, folk songs and legends.¹

Shaping its History and Culture: The Ecological and Migration Factor

Owing to variation in altitude and elevation the region of Uttarakhand is subject to extreme climatic conditions (between the northern part which is higher in altitude and elevation and the southern part that is very hot during the summer). Lying between these two zones of extreme climatic variations are the numerous terraces and valleys which offer potential for rich agricultural production and a surplus of food grains.² That enabled the early settlers to find their own settlements and in course of time the larger settlements played a key role in the process of state formation (Joshi 1990:145).

The existence of terraces and valleys along with a network of perennial rivers and rivulets lent itself to the development of small distinct communities, each of which have the potential to support distinct social groups and exhibit local variations (Raymond & Alchin 1993:33). Further the isolation and relative inaccessibility between different localities led to cultural variations between different social groups. Such variations can be seen among various tribal groups of this region such as Tharus, Rajis, Shaukas, Bhotias, Bhojas, etc.³

Another factor which shaped the culture of this region is the waves of migration and movement of people from southern India, the Gangetic plains, Punjab, Rajasthan, etc. during the early medieval and medieval period. These migrations contributed to the crystallization of

a three tiered stratification of society. A migrant from the plains was considered superior and many claimed descent from some or the other migrant.⁴ Various social groups absorbed the spreading caste structure of Uttarakhand in what seems to be a transformation of local society from a fluid state of caste to a society highly characterized by differing claims to higher status (Brown & Joshi 1956:245). In short, caste was characterized by the convergence of wealth, political power and high rank.⁵ Castes were not categorized merely on the basis of rituals followed but considered as a system that owed much of its character to the distribution of power (Sanwal 1976: 21). Kumaon and Garhwal is perhaps the only example in the country of a local system in which caste groups have emerged on the basis of politico-legal distinctions.

By the 16thc A.D. a three tiered status structure became firmly established and caste in Kumaon and Garhwal was characterized by the convergence of wealth, political power and high rank. Immigrant status coupled with political and administrative power formed the basis of this status structure. 1) *Asal* or *Thul Jat* consists of the *chautani* and *pachbiri* brahmins and the *thakur rajput* or *kshetri* caste. This category primarily consisted of the immigrants who exercised political and economic power. 2) The *Khasis* consisting of the *pitali*, *hali* or *khasi* brahmins and the *khasi jimdar*. This category consisted of those who were not *thuljat* and also of tribals who pursued agriculture as their occupation such as the *shaukas*, *rajis* and *bhotias*. As is evident from their legends most of these tribes claim descent from royal lineages in order to accord themselves legitimacy.⁶ 3) The *Doms* who were the lower castes constituted the artisan class and are collectively referred to as *shilpakar*.

There has ofcourse, been considerable influence from the plains which is evident in the socio-cultural practices of the *paharis* particularly in terms of language, observance of rituals and festivals, beliefs and practices and in the assimilation of popular legends into their local legends, etc.⁷ This influence is particularly pre-dominant in the immigrant areas as is evident amongst the *Bhotias* of *Mana* in *Chamoli* due to their proximity to *Badrinath*.

Despite similarities, assimilations and influences it must be remembered that the socio-cultural practices of Kumaon and Garhwal exhibit many traits which distinguish them from that of the plains such as its fluid caste structure, custom of bride price, importance of women as domestic laborers, religious beliefs and practices, prevalence of polyandry, consumption of liquor and meat by almost all castes. This is because the *paharis* have had a more frequent and intensive contact with one another than with that of the plains because this region is a relatively isolated one. The distinctiveness of the *pahari* culture is also

reflected in its oral traditions such as the *virgathas* or *pavadas* which form an interesting aspect of studying the socio-cultural experiences of the *pahari* folk.

Reconstructing People's Experiences : The Virgathas

The medieval period in Uttarakhand witnessed significant political, economic, social and cultural developments. Factors such as migrations, crystallization of three tiered stratification of society, rivalry between independent chiefdoms until the consolidation of power by the Chand Dynasty in Kumaon and that of the Pamvaras in Garhwal, impact of *bhakti* movement particularly of the *nathpanthis* and *kabirpanthis*, the invasion of the Gorkhas, and annexation by the British in 1815 are some of the significant developments that affected different social groups. They are therefore reflected in Uttarakhand's huge genre of folklore that was transmitted orally through generations. While some of the folklore reflects influences from the plains, others are of local origin referring to the peculiar features of mountain life, social environment and embodying local beliefs and customs. This vast body of oral tradition has been documented by a number of scholars. (Chatak(2002), Oakley & Gairola(1988), Nautiyal(1997), Upreti (1894), Paliwal (1987), Joshi (1971)).

An interesting genre of folk legends of Kumaon and Garhwal is what is popularly known as *virgathas*, also called *pavadas*. They are the tales of kings and chieftains who once ruled the hills and valleys of Kumaon and Garhwal. These legends relate mostly to the period between 800 C.E. and 1700 C.E. when Kumaon and Garhwal were subject to internal feud and strife between petty chieftains. After the liquidation of the central Katyuri kingdom in Garhwal by the Mallas of Nepal in 12th A.D., Garhwal witnessed the rise of several independent principalities (Raturi 1980: 154). An increase in population and the need for surplus led individual chiefdoms to fight against each other to acquire land. Between 12th and 15th C.E. several chiefdoms arose in different parts of Garhwal until Ajaypala of the Pamvara dynasty subjugated all of them. In Kumaon, the presence of larger tracts of fertile valleys had the potential to produce a sizeable surplus. Therefore a large valley became the nucleus of one single principality, wielding enough power to subdue smaller settlements.⁸ These principalities struggled with each other for political supremacy until the rise of the Chand kings who brought the entire Kumaon under their sway in the 16th C.E.

As a result of the rivalry between chieftains in both Kumaon and Garhwal to gain supremacy over each other, socio-political conditions during this period were rather unstable. For instance after the decline of the Katyuri Kingdom, Garhwal was divided into many chiefdoms ruled

by chiefs who were engaged in feuds with each other. T.D. Gairola calls this period as the heroic age of the Himalayas (Oakley & Gairola 1988). These feuds are reflected in legends such as Rikhola and Kalu Bhandari. A popular saying connected with these feuds is "for whose father does wrong, so will his son bear the brunt" (Chatak 2002:264). Other than the rivalry between the chieftains in Kumaon and Garhwal, *virgathas* also reflect the traditional rivalry between Kumaon and Garhwal.⁹ The traditional rivalry between Kumaon and Garhwal is also reflected in the *virgathas* such as Kalu Bhandari, Ajay Bampala, KunjiPal, Brahmadev and Dhamdev.

Virgathas are the biographies of these chieftains and were composed during their life time or in many cases after their death. The tradition of composing and singing these *virgathas* was carried on by the *hurkiyas*. The *hurkiyas*, a sub-caste of the *doms* were the family bards of kings and chieftains. They generally accompanied their masters to the battle field to encourage the chiefs by singing heroic songs. In the legend of Bighri and Bijai Pal, Chand Pal the prince of Kalavatikot was accompanied by his family *hurkiya* Champu in his battle against the king of Dun. Champu sang songs in praise of his master's bravery and courage while playing on his *hurki*, a local instrument. (Oakley & Gairola 1988:101). The legends of Rikhola, Madho Singh, Kalu Bhandari, Gadhu Sumariyal are the *virgathas* of these chiefs which were composed and sung by their family bards. Sometimes the *virgathas* were also used as a means of entertainment in the courts of local chiefs. Other than the *hurkiyas*—the tradition of composing and singing, these *virgathas* were also carried on by the *bhats*, and *chufiyas*. There seems to be an element of similarity in these *gathas* because the underlying theme in all of them is repetitive like the *gathas* of Suraj Kunwar and Brahma Kunwar. Similarly the kidnapping of women is another theme which is quite common in these *gathas*.

When the English East India Company subjugated Kumaon and Garhwal in 1815, internal feud and rivalry between chieftains had considerably declined. Thus the *hurkiyas* lost their sources of information and patronage by their chiefs also declined. The *hurkiyas* then ventured out among the people, singing the legends of their masters. *Virgathas* also came to be sung by professional bards who belonged to the caste of the *Doms* and were regarded as untouchables. They were believed to be the descendants of the former *hurkiyas*. While narrating the *virgathas* the *hurkiyas* themselves emphasized the authenticity of these legends by quoting lengthy genealogies of the chiefs and by giving concrete evidences such as relics and commemorative objects that could still be found. All such instances made the *virgathas* more legitimate and gave a sense of identity to the person which was an important factor in the

popular appeal of these legends. The role of the *hurkiyas*, the manner in which they narrated the legends, the use of music, dance and drama in narration, the style of enunciation, the skill of the *hurkiyas* in giving vivid descriptions of battle, etc. forms a fascinating aspect of the study of these legends.

Subsequently the *virgathas* were either used for general entertainment or for stimulating workers in the fields during harvesting and sowing. (Gobireau: 1971). There is also evidence of the exploitative element that was attached to the singing of the *virgathas* during agricultural operations. (Pathak & Tiwari 1978: 26). Apparently the *padhan* or village arranged for *hurkiya bol* in which the *hurkiyas* sung these legends to stimulate the peasants. The peasants so charged with the heroic deeds of the protagonist that they were made to divert their attention towards harder labor on the fields. Thus it seems that these legends were used by the local authorities to extract greater labor from the peasants. On the other hand the peasants were so charged by the rendition of the legends that they were willing to render free labor in exchange of momentary stimulation experienced while singing along with the *hurkiyas*.

Virgathas become valuable sources of study of Himalayan culture because they help us to determine the prevalent socio-cultural perceptions of the people. The underlying theme of the *virgathas* mainly relate to love and war in which elements of revenge, rebellion, vendetta, trial of strength and romance constitute an integral part of these legends. From Garhwal we have *virgathas* such as Kafu Chauhan, Madho Singh Rikhola, Gadhu Sumariyal, Hari Hindavan. Hinsu Hindavan, Kalu Bhandari, Bhanu Bhaunpla, Suraj Kunwar are some of the popular *pavadas* from Garhwal, while in Kumaon Hunraj Mahara, Raja Brahm Deo, Kunji Pal and Kirti Pal, Baghdeo, Ajay Bampla, Renu Rawat and Supia Rawat are some of the popular *virgathas*. The romantic elements in these *gathas* constitute an important angle in these legends because acquiring women was invariably the root cause of war. This is evident in the *virgathas* of Madho Singh, Kala Bandari and Ranu Jhankaru.

The portrayal of women, social values and images associated with them can also be ascertained in these legends. In the *virgathas* of Kalu Bhandari and Ranu Jhankaru ideals of fidelity and chastity generally expected of women seems to have been a symbol of inspiration for the hero. Some of these *gathas* or legends also reflect the prevalence of the custom of sati. For example in Ranu Jhankaru, when Ranu's wife did not commit sati on the death of her husband she could not remove the stigma and was rebuked by her own son. The role of the widowed mother who was considered as a symbol of fidelity and chastity was a source of inspiration for her sons to fight against the enemy and this

was an important aspect of these legends. "The milk from the mother's breast has the power to destroy the shield of the enemy and give life to a warrior" and "if I am the wife of one and the mother of two and if I have not committed any sin, then any wish shall be fulfilled" are some of the popular sayings associated with these legends (Chatak 2002:266).

Virgathas also convey the perceptions of *pahari* women on the futility of war. In the legend Madho Singh Rikhola, Rikhola the mother Amaravati curses that no hero should be born in Garhwal. In Ranu Jhankaru, the mother clasps the hands of her sons for nine days to prevent them from fighting. This is probably because Himalayan society was much scarred by battle, which resulted in women becoming widows and children destitutes. One also comes across legends such as Brahma Deo and Birma Ditoli where the widows and daughters of the heroes killed in battle take up arms against enemies. On the other hand there are also legends like Hyunraj Mahara in which the mother of Dattu and Chandu of the Belwal family (family priests of the mahars) poisoned her family members after their defeat at the hands of the Mahar brothers. For her it was better to commit suicide than let their bodies be touched by the mahara khasias. These legends thus represent different perspectives of the women folk on how they perceived rivalry, conflict and its aftermath. More importantly, they reveal how women themselves were perceived in society, their 'position' vis-à-vis men, the gender roles and ideals they were expected to adhere to.

The kidnapping of women seems to be another popular theme in these legends. In the legend of Brahma Kunwar (referred to as the brother of Krishna) the hero kidnaps Jyotramala, the daughter of the Bhot king Sonpal on the orders of Krishna. The motive behind this kidnapping may have been love but in order to give it some legitimacy and sanctity, the name of Lord Krishna may have been added as the hero's brother, to glorify the honor of Brahma Kunwar. In another legend when Brahma Kunwar goes to Nagbhoomi to kidnap Patharmala, he asks her to elope with him but she rebukes him saying that women should not be taken away stealthily (Chatak 2002:159). Thus on the one hand we have instances of legends legitimizing the kidnapping of women while on the other we find elements of protest from the women themselves.

The prevalence of the custom of bride price can also be inferred from some of the *gathas*. In Kalu Bhandari, Dhamdeo the father of Udai Mala agrees to give his daughter to Kalu on the condition that he paid him one *supa* (winnowing basket) of rupees (Chatak 2002: 266). In Hari and Hinsu Hindavan the Raja lays down the condition that Sureksha should kill Gaudi Rakhshasa to marry his daughter. Such instances where fathers agreed to give away their daughters but with conditions

are only reflective of the importance of women's work in *pahari* society. The mountainous terrain coupled with ecological factors made women indispensable in household and agricultural work. Vast stretches of agricultural land was required to be brought under cultivation and therefore women played an important role both in the fields as well as at housework. It is therefore quite probable that these factors may have encouraged the practice of the custom of bride price which may have originally been practiced by some ethnic groups and on account of its economic advantage spread widely among agricultural communities. It is also possible that the migrants who were unknown here due to their inability to establish a regular matrimonial alliance with the settlers in this region may have purchased some of the women and in course of time bride price took a customary right.

Another important aspect of the *virgathas* is the image and role of the hero. He is inevitably represented as one who triumphs over evil. He rebels against exploitation mainly in the form of illegal uses imposed upon people by the kings who are generally represented as autocratic. Thus Hunraj Mahara rebelled against the Raja of Champawatgarh, against the extraction of illegal taxes. Brahmadeo, the prince of Katyurgarh refused to pay illegal exactions imposed by the Rajas of Champawatgrah and declared his independence. The hero at same time is also represented as the upholder of law and order and assisting the king against enemies of the kingdom as evident in Ranu Jankaru and Hinwa and Bhinwa Rawat. These enemies may be regarded as symbolic of leaders of rival factions who were conspiring to overthrow the administration (Oakley & Gairola 1988). The hero is also represented as one who has suffered and who ultimately triumphs over his unfortunate circumstances. He is able to vindicate the honor of his family, as reflected in Gadu Sumariyal and Hyunraj Mahara. In the hero's triumph over struggle, the people sought reassurance against the vicissitudes of their own times.

In some of the *virgathas* the hero is represented as a romantic lover as in the legends of Malushahi and Rajula, Kalu Bhandari, Ramola, Sumeru, Rautela, Rani Surma, Jeetu Bagadwal, Fyuli ki gatha, Sadei ki gatha, etc. Sometimes the hero is portrayed as breaking barriers of caste prejudices and the custom of bride price etc. in order to acquire his beloved, symbolizing the protagonist's desire for release from such constraints. Malushahi who hailed from the ruling class fell in love with Rajula, the daughter of a Hock owner (Oakley & Gairola 1988). On the other hand these *gathas* also illustrate how the hero upheld these very social institutions. For example Chhapita Hyunr died while striking a blow on a Naithani Brahman who had taunted him about his kshatriya status. Thus on the one hand while people honored the prevalence of

these institutions, on the other there was an underlying desire to break away from them.

Other than *virgathas*, the folklore of Uttarakhand has a rich treasure of a vast variety of legends. While some shed light on the Gorkha and Mughal invasions in this region, the popular ones being *Natiram*, *Nanya Kamin* and *Sheerhram*, there are a large number that are primarily religious in nature. They reflect the beliefs and sentiments of different categories of society with regard to the supernatural. (Anand 2006:93-102). A study of these legends help us to understand better the socio-cultural experiences of the people of this region, which has otherwise been largely neglected by academics and scholars.

Notes

¹ The people of the sub-Himalayan hills from Kashmir to eastern Nepal are referred to by the generic term '*pahari*' (meaning the mountains). While not a particularly precise term, it is a useful denotation and is recognized throughout North India. The languages of the hill regions like the people are also termed *pahari*.

² The dense forests along with a network of perennial rivers and rivulets in addition to several valleys which were wide and rich in alluvium provided means of subsistence to the early settlers.

³ In fact the people of Jaunsar Bawar practiced polyandry, while the Tharus and Bhojas of Tehri Garhwal followed polygamy. The Bhotias of Mana are more steeped in the traditions of Hinduism than their counterparts of Uttarkashi.

⁴ The Bhojas of Dehradun trace their origin to the Khushbani Rajputs while others trace theirs to the legendary Jagatdeo of Dharanagar.

⁵ For instance the Pachbiri brahmins, who performed priestly functions enjoyed a subordinate status as compared to the Chauthani brahmins who held administrative posts. When the former acquired administrative positions they became chauthanis and Pitali if they used the plough.

⁶ Some Bhojas claim descent from the Rajput nobles of Jaipur and Jodhpur. The Bhojas of Dehradun who claim to be Khushbani Rajput, trace their descent from Kush and therefore link themselves with Rama and Sita.

⁷ One can see a similarity between the pahari version of the legend Chandravali ki gatha and that of the Malawi and Bundeli version of the same gatha.

⁸ Sur Askot, Gangolight and Sira Katyur are characterized by large wide fertile valleys that led to the rise of independent principalities.

⁹ Garhwali kings Man Shah, Dularam Shah, Mahipati Shah and Medini Shah were engaged in war with the Kumauni kings.

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